

(Mis)reading Social Class in the Journey Towards College: Youth Development In Urban America

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While college is perceived as a given for many middle- and upper-income students graduating from high school, the transition from secondary to higher education is a much more complicated one for low-income students, particularly poor and working-class students of color. This article focuses on the critical juncture—one that is under-explored in both the literature on secondary schools and higher education—that these students arrive at when they graduate from high school, and their decision-making processes about whether or not to attend college. What are students worried about? Who are they receiving help from? What do they already know and not know about colleges and the differences between them? How are they making choices about where to apply, and then where to go? What stumbling blocks do they encounter, what are their doubts and fears? Drawing on research conducted at three small urban public schools over the course of a year, this article offers an important lens on the ways that social class shapes students' developmental experiences and choices, paving some roads and obstructing easy access down others.

INTRODUCTION

The scene: A 12th-grade college prep class at a small public school in New York City. The class of 15 students is exclusively African American and Latino, and from low-income households.

It is May, and a college representative has been invited in to the class to give a lesson on “budgeting”—presumably on the assumption that this is something that students don't yet know about, but will need to now that they're graduating from high school.

The college representative hands out a budget sheet to each of the students. He returns to the front of the room, straightens his tie and clears his throat. “Now, how much do you think the average person makes in their first year out of college?”

“Mad money,” calls out one student.

“To me, I would assume that was like \$100,000. You probably won’t be making that much right out of college.”

“Thirty to forty thousand,” calls out another student.

“That’s probably about right—assume it’s about forty thousand. So, fill in that figure on your sheet. Then go through and fill out the chart of fixed monthly and annual expenses: rent, utilities, food, telephone, car payments, car insurance, transportation.”

I walk around the room as students quietly fill out the charts. Their figures for rent: \$300, \$500, \$100. Many are quite aware of their family’s monthly rent, though probably not of how incredibly low these figures are in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the country. On many of the other blanks, they are stumped. Finally, Juan asks, “How much is rent? What if you live in the projects?”

“Assume you don’t live in the projects—that you live in regular housing, no Section-8 or anything like that,” the representative answers.

“Can you buy a used car?” counters Juan.

“Assume for this that you’re buying a new car.”

“How much are utilities?” Irie puzzles. “We don’t pay utilities; in the projects, sometimes you pay one, or the other, or neither—that’s just how it works.”

“Assume you’re paying about \$80 a month for utilities,” responds the representative, with growing frustration. Why, he seems to be wondering, are these students so unable to come up with the answers he was expecting? And what is he supposed to do with their questions?

In the corner, Isabella mutters, “I’d have Section-8, candles, and go to the Salvation Army for clothes.”

What she means is: I cannot assume.

For these students—as for many others that I worked with and followed during a two-year research project from 2002-2004—the issues that they face as they complete high school and make choices about their future are not the ones that the representative’s scenario had been prepared for. It is not that they don’t want to earn \$40,000 a year, buy a new car, and be able to move away from the projects. However, having grown up poor, Isabella, Juan, and Irie are deeply aware of the ways that they cannot assume the “average” life of which the representative so blithely speaks; and they understand, in ways that he does not, the risks that they must take in order to reach for the middle-class world he describes.

It is these risks, the things that low-income students cannot “assume”—and what they reflect about how issues and experiences of social class shape youth development—that I explore in this article. In particular, I focus on the critical juncture that these students arrive at when they graduate from high school, and their decision-making processes about whether or not to attend college. This moment in these young peoples’ lives—as they stand at the door of adulthood, gauging its opportunities and hazards, reading the world and the possibilities it holds for them—offers an important lens on the ways that social class shapes students’ developmental experiences and choices, paving some roads and obstructing easy access down others.

In their senior year of high school, as they make their way through the college application process: What are students worried about? Who are they receiving help from? What do they already know and not know about colleges and the differences between them? How are they making choices about where to apply, and then where to go? What stumbling blocks do they encounter, what are their doubts and fears? And, traveling with them through to the following September: Where do they end up, and why?

I examine this move from high school to higher education through ethnographic research that follows students—based at three different high schools in New York City—across the arc of this crucial year. In doing so, I hope to make a contribution to existing literature in two ways. While a wealth of existing high school-to-college literature has studied this transition, it has tended to look wide rather than deep (i.e., through surveys or single interviews with many students) and to focus on programmatic solutions rather than seeking to unravel complicated causes. Through ethnography, I hope to fill in the details of a picture that has until now been sketched only in outline.

And as these details became clearer, they pushed me to want to challenge some of the constructs that have been used to explain the often

less-than-positive outcomes of this transition for low-income students, and to question the portrayal of poor and working-class students' decision-making processes at this juncture. While scholars have puzzled over "contradictory attitudes towards education" exhibited by low-income students both white (Weis, 1990), Latino, and African-American (Hochschild, 1995), and have struggled to explain the "oppositional identity" particularly of African-American students (Ogbu, 1989; Ogbu, 1990), I believe that too often, the aspirations and motivations of these students and their families and communities are misread—by both academics and educators—as they struggle to figure out whether or how to attend college.

A more critical reading of the risks that social-class positioning exposes poor and working-class students to shows their hesitations, contradictions, and decisions in a very different light. By connecting the "micro" of their daily lives with the "macro" of financial-aid policies, existing portrayals of higher education, and social access to experiences of college in previous generations, I argue that decisions that these students make need to be judged from the shoes in which they stand, with the deepest possible understanding of what it's like to "live the specificities of a classed location at a particular time and place" (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). Walkerdine et al. also say that rather than holding up the uniformity of educational achievement among middle- and upper-class students as the only rational outcome/choice, it is important to explore the enduring importance of class in explaining the educational trajectories and life chances of poor and working-class youth.

This understanding is crucial in a range of arenas: to work in educational sociology and the sociology of class; to policy-makers attempting to solve problems in secondary and higher education; and to educators working directly with students in both areas. Without it, we fail to comprehend an important force in the development of these young people.

(MIS)READING SOCIAL CLASS

In my past experience, as a teacher of mostly poor and working-class eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, I must admit to my own lack of understanding about the forces acting upon my students. In this, I believe, I was not alone. For members of the middle class—teachers and educators among them—the educational choices of poor and working-class students often appear puzzling.

The reasons *for* going to college seemed so compelling, from where I stood. The economics seemed to speak for themselves: while the median annual household income of a high-school graduate is slightly above

\$35,000 per year, with a bachelor's degree, median household income reaches above \$60,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). As Gladieux (2004) notes, "There are no guarantees in life, with or without a college diploma . . . but the odds are increasingly stacked against those with the least education and training . . . the decision to attend college, and often which particular college and course of study, determines more than ever who has entrée to the best jobs and life chances" (p. 18).

When students chose not to go to college, then, it was hard not to somehow conclude that students simply must *not* understand the consequences of their choices and actions. How could they understand the benefits they would reap by going to college, and choose not to? Perhaps if we could explain more clearly, to young people and their families, my colleagues and I thought again and again—they would make different decisions. Aronowitz (2000) notes a ". . . commonly held, largely middle-class assumption that 'making it' . . . is reasonable and those who fail to measure up may be judged irrational or simply incapable of learning what they need to know" (p. 6).

As a researcher, I have had the chance to step back and ask: what, in fact, *do* poor and working-class students know and understand about the economics of getting a college education? *Is* it the case that they are confused, unclear, acting in contradictory ways, and that a "rational" course is represented by middle-class students whose articulated goals and outcomes are more in line?

In important ways, much of current academic literature seems to support this view of low-income students and families. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) explore the "ambition paradox" of college choices among low-income youth, and conclude that these young people's educational paths are often the result of "misaligned ambitions," due to lack of information and unrealistic expectations. In her mid-1980s study of white working-class high school students in upstate New York, Weis (1990) characterizes these students' relationship with schooling as "contradictory," and argues that this contradictory relationship is even more exaggerated among poor blacks (p. 37).

And in several articles, John Ogbu makes the (by now familiar) argument for an "oppositional culture" which explains educational outcomes for low-income students of color. He argues that, "Oppositional identity plays a major role in the attitudes of the community, parents, and students toward school because they see the school as a white institution . . . conforming to school requirements means 'acting white' and giving up one's minority identity. . . . All of these attitudes and behaviors lead inevitably to poor academic performance" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 178–9).

The findings from my research, however, point to a different explanation for the educational choices of poor and working-class youth—one that is intimately tied to social class and its effects on young people's development. Like Mickelson (1990), I found that while students expressed an “abstract” belief, based on the dominant American ideology, that through education, everyone has access to “making it” in America, they also often acted on more “concrete” beliefs—“accurate assessments of the returns that their education is likely to bring them as they make the transition to adulthood” (p. 45).

With very few exceptions, the group of high-school seniors that I followed through their college-application process—all of who were qualified to attend college, as demonstrated through their acceptance rates—began the year declaring that they wanted and planned to go to college. Their journey towards that goal, however, covered very different terrain based on their backgrounds and financial resources. Like Mickelson, my research reveals that students in fact make extremely accurate assessments of the choices the world is offering to them, and the risks that they face in their transition to adulthood: but that these choices and risks are very different for different groups of students based on their social-class location. Most strikingly, poor and working-class students face significant economic, social, and psychological risks that middle- and upper-class students do not.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

From 2002–2004, I followed the journey of a group of high-school seniors in three small urban high schools as they made their plans for life after graduation.¹ This time of transition and choices about the future is under-explored in both the literature on secondary schools and higher education; yet it seemed like a crucial one in understanding why high-school students do or do not go on to college, and how they arrive at particular institutions if they do. While the outcomes of this process—in terms of college attendance in the fall for students who undertook the college-application process the previous year—are more likely to be predictable for middle- and upper-income students, this is often not the case for low-income students.

Because the study was conceived as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998), I spent a year at each school doing participant observation in a college prep class or an “advisory” class where students were focusing on applying to college. I attended this class at least once a week from September to June, listening and taking notes as well as helping individual students fill out college applications or financial aid forms; occasion-

ally, I would teach a whole-group lesson, or lead a conversation with the students (Bosk, 1989).

I also followed a small group of students much more closely (two at one school, four at another, six at the third, in rough proportion to the size of the school's senior class), conducting focus groups and individual interviews with them on an ongoing basis over the course of the year and through the summer. In order to get a fuller picture of the process these students were going through, I interviewed their parents or a significant adult in their lives; and I interviewed teachers, college counselors, and the principals of each of the schools. Finally, I administered two surveys to a larger cohort of seniors at each of the schools (one in December, one in June),² making it possible to see how common or unique individual students' experiences and perspectives were within the context of the school as a whole. Throughout the study, I used the extended case method (Burawoy, Burton, Ferguson, Fox, Gamson, Gartrell, Hurst, Kurzman, Salzinger, Schiffman, & Ui, 1991) to analyze the effects of the "macro" of financial aid policies, media portrayals of college, and social access to information about higher education on the "micro" of students' daily lives.

Two of the schools in which my research was conducted—Vista Academy and Connections High—have student bodies that are overwhelmingly African American and Latino and low-income. At both schools, more than 80% of students qualify for free lunch, and over 90% of students are African American or Latino. At the third school—Tower High School³—there is a greater (and, unusual for New York City) racial and economic balance: in 2003–4, 36% of students qualified for free lunch, and the student body was 45% white, 18% African American, 28% Latino, and 9% Asian/other.⁴

These three high schools are unique in several important ways. As members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, they are part of an educational reform movement advocating for small high schools with a twenty-five year history in New York City. Vista and Connections both have enrollments of less than 300; while considerably larger at just over a thousand students, Tower is still considerably smaller than most New York City high schools. None of these schools track their students—all students are assumed to be "college-bound" and thus receive a college-prep curriculum. At all three schools, close to 100% of the 2003 and 2004 graduating cohorts of students applied to college. These college-application rates are particularly noteworthy given research on socioeconomic status and the likelihood of students filling out college applications.⁵

These schools, then, represent tremendous success in moving poor and working-class urban youth of color towards college.⁶And yet, my own

experiences as a teacher and my conversations with teachers at these schools alerted me to a phenomenon that was not documented anywhere:⁷ though over 90% of students were accepted to college and said in June that they planned to go, when we bumped into them on the street, we discovered that many of them did not in fact enroll for the first day of classes in September. What, I wondered, was happening over the summer? What, perhaps, was happening over the course of their senior year and college-application process that teachers and advisors had failed to notice?

Connections High, Vista Academy, and Tower High School offered a unique opportunity for this inquiry. With their commitment to untracking, their emphasis on preparing all students for college, and improved educational outcomes for low-income students of color, these schools have removed many of the institutional barriers that account for low student achievement in many other urban and suburban school systems (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2003; Knight, 2004; Nieto, 1992; Oakes, 1985). What my research revealed was that, despite these impressive reforms, formidable roadblocks still lay on students' paths towards college.

FINANCIAL RISKS: FROM MICRO TO MACRO

Nationwide data confirms a consensus among young people on the financial imperative to go to college: fully 95% of current high-school students say, when asked, that they want to go on to higher education (Adelman, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2001). However, unlike their middle-class peers, poor and working-class students cannot take the word of their college counselor (who most likely is also middle class) that, "they should just apply, don't worry about the money now."⁸ Paulsen and St. John (2002) note that, "Students have dramatically different choice contexts, which have a pervasive influence on multiple stages of the sequences of student choices" (p. 194).

For many middle-class students, the college-application process is one of self-exploration. What do they like to do? Which part of the country would they feel comfortable in? What kind of campus or study body appeals to them, which school has the nicest dorms or library or playing fields? In a survey in a largely middle- and upper-class suburban school in the spring,⁹ when asked about their worries about starting college in the fall, seniors' answers included "laundry" and "making friends." At Tower High School, in answer to the question, "Is there anything that you worry

might get in the way of your plans for next year? If so, what might those things be?” a majority of middle-class students wrote “no”, “n/a”, a question mark, or left the question blank¹⁰ Answers from poor and working-class students at Vista, Connections and Tower looked very different. Over and over again, they wrote, “Money, finances.” “Money.” “Money.”

By following students throughout the year, the complexity of their one-word answer was revealed. “Money” was an issue for these students on many levels, at many different points in their consideration of college. Their lived economic realities, as well as their reading of the socioeconomic terrain that they were about to enter, came into play in their decision-making in ways both large and small.

A Dollar for Lunch

At a most fundamental level, I watched students grapple with the microeconomics of day-to-day survival. Many of the costs of college are invisible to middle-class adults or young people because they do not live on a tight budget. For poor students, however, the cost of transportation to school, books, and food loom large in trying to imagine themselves on a college campus.

One Connections High student, arriving late to meet a group that was traveling to visit a school in New Jersey, called to explain that she was back at Penn Station. What should she do?

“Take the subway to school (i.e., Connections High), Jasnery. You’re going to have to go to classes today since you missed the trip,” the accompanying teacher answered.

“I can’t,” Jasnery replied. “I don’t have any money to take the train. I’ll have to call my brother to come get me.”

A month later, I saw her eating her lunch, which consisted of a small bag of pretzels and a four-ounce container of colored water, and asked if she was on a diet.

“No, I’m not on a diet. But I only have a dollar for lunch,” she explained.

Having arrived at college, Jasmine, another Connections High student, found herself in exactly the situation she had feared come Thanksgiving vacation.

“I signed up to take the charter bus to New York [from Hampton, Virginia], but then they cancelled it at the last minute. And they sent the money home to my father rather than giving it back to me! How am I supposed to get home, then? I don’t have \$60 for the bus! I had to wait for my father to wire it to me. . . .”

The deep financial difficulties of daily life that these students cope with often became clear in the context of my research.

“I’m not really having to pay anything now”

On a second level, students were deeply affected by the rising costs of college and trends in family income which, when put together, have hit poor students the hardest (Gladieux, 2004, p. 24). Research from the past fifteen years (St. John & Noell, 1989; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Kane, 1999) consistently suggests that low-income students are more sensitive to tuition increases than middle- and upper-income students. “Whereas cost considerations did not play a substantial role in the college choices made by most upper-income students [which they categorize as income greater than \$60,000]. . . low-income students treated cost-related factors as a major consideration in their college-choice process (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 209, 207). While the astronomical price tags of private colleges mean that middle- and upper-income families increasingly *do* need to pay attention to cost when making college choices, money does not play as overwhelming—and defining—a role as it does for low-income families.

In large part, this is due to the different percentages of their family income made up by the cost of attending college, and the effects of falling real income on poor and working-class families. For a low-income family, the average annual bill for attending a public four-year institution represented nearly 60% of their income in 2001–2, up from 42% in 1971–2; for a high-income family, the same bill represented only 5% of their income in 2001–2, down from 6% in 1971–2 (Gladieux, 2004, p. 26).

Recent conversations with students at Tower High School reflect these different realities. In one conversation with three working-class students of color, I pressed them on the issue of how much their parents could pay for college.

Janice: But what if they say you have to pay \$4,000 a year?

Evie: That’s not that bad. Because I think I could get a scholarship for that.

Mark: Oh, in terms of getting a scholarship. I thought you meant like having to pay. . .

Janice: So, your parents—your parents couldn't pay \$4,000?

Sara: Yeah, no.

Mark: No, I don't think so.

Evie: Maybe they would be able to. I mean, if it came down to like I have to pay or else I can't go to the college I really want to, then \$4,000 is not that bad.

Two middle-class Tower students—Nigel and Aaron—also said that money was an issue for them. Their sense of how *much* money was a worry, however, reflected a very different situation.

Nigel: I recently actually got into Oberlin, but I'm deciding not to go. I've going to stick with SUNY Albany.

Janice: So, what made you decide? Because that was one of your top choices, from when I talked to you earlier.

Nigel: Yeah. Well, I would have had to pick up college debt, or more so. I'm not really having to pay anything now. Well, I only have to pay like \$8,000 a year.

Aaron: I am worried about money. I should have enough money in my college fund for the first year, and part of the second, and then I'll be in debt.

Janice: How much does it cost?

Aaron: \$27,000 a year.

While for Evie, Mark and Sara, \$4,000 for a year of college seems like a huge sum, Nigel describes the \$8,000-a-year SUNY tuition as “not really having to pay anything” and Aaron—with close to \$40,000 in a college fund—is worried about money. Clearly, the families of both Nigel and Aaron have enough money to attend public four-year colleges—what is at issue is whether or not they can afford private colleges. With \$4,000 feeling like a stretch for the families of Evie, Mark, and Sara, however, attend-

ing college at all becomes a question. Thus, while students across the economic spectrum worry about the cost of college, these worries are of a very different shape depending on students' social class location.

"I guess I'll look for scholarships, but I'm not taking out loans!"

On a third level, at the same time that college costs have been rising and real family income falling, the amount of financial aid available to low-income students to offset the costs of college has been shrinking over the past thirty years. Poor and working-class students, keenly aware of the economic landscape surrounding them, are in fact more aware of what this means on the ground than their (often middle-class) teachers and college counselors who may have attended college ten or fifteen years previously.

These changes in financial aid—a marked shift from grants to loans (Gladieux, 2004; Kahlenberg, 2004; Kane, 1999; McPherson & Shapiro, 1991; Mortenson, 1990a and b; Mumpers, 1996; Paulsen & St. John, 2002), the extension of eligibility for federal aid up the economic ladder without additional funding (thus lowering the amount of money per student) (Gladieux, 2004), the increasing use by states of merit-based scholarships rather than need-based ones, and the creation of tax credits such as educational IRAs and Lifetime Learning Tax Credits—have all come at the expense of financial help for low-income students. Gladieux notes that tax credits alone are projected to cost the U.S. Treasury \$60 billion dollars in lost revenue between 2003–2007, but that almost none of that money will go to low-income students (2004, p. 34).

Not surprisingly, these new financial conditions in higher education have had different effects across social classes (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Low-income students pursuing four-year degrees must borrow more than higher-income students, meaning that (given interest payments) they in fact pay *more* for the same college education. Mumpers calculates, "The student who borrows the maximum Stafford loan amount for each of his or her four years of college will have borrowed \$18,000 when they graduate. When the loan is finally paid off, he or she will have repaid more than \$27,000" (1996, p. 131).

At the same time, loans for higher education are a much greater risk for poor and working-class students. Many may have watched family members, friends, or neighbors take out loans, and then drop out of college and be unable to pay them back (McDonough, 1997). Research shows that students educated in inner-city schools (as their families, neighbors, and friends are most likely to have been) are more likely to be underprepared for college (Campagne & Hossler, 1998; Kane, 1999;

Mumpers, 1996), putting them at higher risk of dropping out, or needing to take remedial classes in college—increasing their loan costs and delaying their entry into the job market (Fossey, 1998). Gladieux notes, “Some of these students may be left worse off if they have borrowed to finance their studies. . . . They leave college with no degree, no skills, and a debt to repay” (2004, p. 23).

The poor and working-class students at Tower, Connections, and Vista Academy were painfully aware of this danger. Throughout the year, along with their more general worries about money, almost every student I spoke with echoed one refrain, “I’m not taking out loans”; “I don’t know how I’m going to pay, but I don’t want to borrow money!”; “I guess I’ll look for scholarships, but I’m not taking out loans!” Though they may not know the specific history of financial-aid shifts, or the intricacies of tax credits and interest payments, their vehemence reflects the all-too-real risks they take in taking on higher-education debt.

“You’re not the only one who has an education”

Finally, low-income students’ assessments reflect an awareness of larger global trends in the economy, and what these trends may mean for them. Research supports that, even if these students do succeed in finishing college, it is unclear if their earnings after college will justify the money they must borrow (Freeman, 1999; Perna, 1998). Students from low-income backgrounds, on average, earn less post-college than higher-income students (Mortenson, 1990a; Mumpers, 1996); likewise, according to the most recent census data, African Americans and Latinos earn less than their white counterparts even when they hold equivalent degrees.¹¹

And despite educational reports stressing huge increases in the number of jobs requiring a college degree (Haycock & Huang, 2001), economists’ predictions about the future labor market further bear out students’ worries. Lafer (2002) notes that no economist predicts that the total demand for college-educated workers will exceed 25–30% of the labor force at any point in the foreseeable future; likewise, Kern (2000) estimates that the labor market requires only 27% of workers to have 16 or more years of education, another 26% to have 8–10 years plus additional on-the-job training, and the rest to have less education. This is exactly what MacLeod finds when he re-interviews the “Brothers” several years after his original 1987 study, *Ain’t No Makin It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low Income Community*. “Although blacks are staying in school, their job prospect fail to show a corresponding improvement. . . [For the Brothers] a high school diploma, a bit of college, a positive

attitude and a wealth of ambition do not pay off as advertised” (1995, p. 214, 237).

In one group discussion towards the end of the year, several Connections High students argued:

Even if you go to college, you’re not the only one who has an education. Just because you graduated doesn’t mean you’ve got a guaranteed job.

You’re not going to start off at the top, and you’re going to have loans to pay.

From the most micro to the most macro aspects, then, poor and working-class students confront a very different reality than middle-class students do. Regardless of their academic ability, low-income students face far greater financial hurdles when choosing to attend college, particularly a four-year residential college. For many, it is a risk that appears too great. Though students’ abstract attitudes about higher education—and deeply held desires and dreams—are very similar across class lines, the realities on which they must base their decisions reflect very different landscapes.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RISKS

Alongside the hard reality of financial risks these students must take, lie other risks—less quantifiable, and more difficult for students to articulate, but equally as real. In attempting the move to higher education, they must also face enormous social and psychological risks. They must put their self-esteem on the line, by taking the chance that they will be rejected by the world they hope to enter; they must brave subtle and not-so-subtle messages about who belongs in the world of higher education and who doesn’t; they must shoulder the weight of their own, their family’s, and their community’s hopes and fears about moving out of poverty and into an unfamiliar middle-class orbit; and far too often, they must make this journey alone and unaided.

At Connections High and Vista Academy, the majority of students were the first generation in their family to attend college (at Tower, this was the case for many low-income students of color, but *not* for white and middle-class students). Though many had older siblings, cousins, or aunts and uncles who had gone or were in college, their parents had not attended, and indeed often had not finished high school. Literature on first-generation students details the many emotional and psychological

challenges that they face (London, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992) upon arriving on a college campus; what my research suggests is that these issues rear their head long before that point, most concretely at the moment when students begin the college-application process.

These students' lack of easy access to information about higher education and the application process plays an important role in the challenges they face. Many middle-class students are surrounded by this information, without even being aware of it: parents' conversations about their alma maters and college days, family friends who apply a few years ahead of them, the names of top colleges that are a part of every day conversations among their peers. This cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) —or lack thereof—is an important element in understanding students' journey towards college. But beyond the difficulties this creates in actually navigating the application process for poor and working-class students, the fact that the world of higher education is unfamiliar territory—that they are traveling to a foreign country rather than to the next state over—plays an important role in the anxieties involved in this process. While many middle-class students receive the message from early on that they are destined to go on to higher education (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) and feel a sense of entitlement to that destiny (McDonough, 1997; Lareau, 2003), low-income/first-generation students are trying on a college-going identity as they take part in the application process. Thus, they must confront deep psychological fears and doubts in making this shift: Are they prepared? Will they be able to fit in? Who can help them if they falter? And what will failure mean about them and to their families and communities?

“I just thought that’s what college was, preppy – that there wasn’t anywhere that wasn’t J. Crew”

In *Choosing Colleges*, McDonough argues that students believe they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family's habitus or class status, because they perceive their choices by scanning the environment around them (1997, p. 9); students read these powerful “concrete” messages at the same time that they want and hope to believe “abstract” declarations that anyone can go to any college, if they work hard enough.

As students try on this new identity, they are scrutinizing themselves and this new uniform in the mirror. Does it fit them? Do they fit it? As astute readers of the social and economic landscape around them, students have not missed the images on television and in movies of what a

college campus looks like—expanses of green, quiet, columned halls—and who is there. They have not missed the fact that there are not a lot of students like themselves. Laura, one of the Vista students, reflected back on her sense of college in eleventh grade when she first began thinking about it: “I just thought that’s what college was, preppy—that there wasn’t anywhere that wasn’t J. Crew.”

Various points in the college-application process reinforced their doubts. Seemingly benign—if frustrating—bureaucratic forms carried messages that were invisible to (my own) middle-class eyes, but that spoke loudly to these young people. The long list of questions included: What year and make is your car? Mortgage information? Net worth of your parents’ investments? Of tax-deferred pension plans?

What does it mean if your family doesn’t have any of these things?

And what does it mean if the form doesn’t seem to even be talking about you? For those who live with grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other extended family members, because their parents have died or are in prison—not a small number of these students—their families were defined right out of existence.

Page seven of the FAFSA form reads as follows:

Read these notes to determine who is considered a parent on this form. Answer all questions in Step Four about them, even if you do not live with them. (Note that grandparents and legal guardians are not parents.)

Time after time, I watched students struggle through the same questions and then leave the answers blank, folding the form back into their bag in a huff of anger or with a sigh of quiet resignation. Was this, I began to wonder, what Sennett and Cobb (1972) meant by “the hidden injuries of class?”

“Pennsylvania didn’t want me”

Taking a step into a different social world—where they don’t know the rules, and are not sure they belong—places students’ self-esteem on the line in way that is distinctly different from what middle-class students experience in their college-application process.¹² In their research with working-class residents of Boston the late 1970s, Sennett and Cobb found that attempts at mobility worked on the deepest levels of people’s psyches, and affected their sense of their own abilities. “These were, after all, people who had experienced frustration, who had suffered from a gnawing sense of powerlessness, who had been treated for most of their life as

undistinctive. All of that experience, which had to do with the structure of class, had presented itself to them as a problem with the structure of their own characters; and so there lay an unspoken distrust of themselves below the surface, a feeling of doubt” (1972, p. 182).

For the students whom I followed, this often took the form of backing away from the dreams they had articulated at the beginning of the year. McDonough explains that college-attendance patterns are as much an issue of self-selection processes as they are of college-admissions decisions, because students self-select themselves out based on their SAT scores (1997, p. 3). And Bourdieu and Passeron (writing about the French system in the 1970s) argue that, “Most of those excluded from studying at the various levels of education eliminate themselves before being examined . . . previous performance being equal, pupils of working-class origin are more likely to ‘eliminate themselves’ from secondary education by declining to enter it” (1977, p.153).

Most of the students whom I worked with were unwilling to do this—as their doubts surfaced powerfully in the spring (waiting to hear from colleges), they clung fiercely to their determination to go on to higher education. But while I watched middle-class students read college rejection letters as individual statements from particular schools, several poor and working-class students seemed to attribute a more global meaning to them, and to have much more visceral reactions. These students, from the most timid to the most confident, made moves to protect themselves from the possibility or reality of rejection.

Arriving for college class at Vista Academy one day in April, Carina announced to the room, “I didn’t get into the University of Maryland. I burned my letter.” In telling me about her acceptances, Saquina explained that she hadn’t gotten in to two schools in Pennsylvania, Lafayette, and Bucknell. “I guess Pennsylvania didn’t want me,” she said sadly. And, after anxiously checking the mail for weeks, Amelia grew frustrated with not hearing from Lang College, her first choice. When, several weeks later, she did finally get an acceptance letter from them, she decided not to go. “I don’t want to go there anymore,” she complained, “They waited too long to tell me.”

One of the teachers at Vista—having grown up poor in New York City and begun higher education at a community college before transferring to Harvard—explained how he understood students’ reactions. “I didn’t have a college degree until two years ago. And I had a looming suspicion in my life that the other guy knows more than me . . . a lot of young people of color feel that way Whenever I’d go anywhere else, particularly if there were white students—I’d worry that I’m not as smart, I’d

look at the words they use, the way they speak. They speak the language of power.”

Thus, at important moments of transition, painful questions of self and identity—questions that are rooted in students’ class identity more than their individual abilities or personalities—rear their heads for poor and working-class students. While I watched many, many students fight their way through these doubts, it was also clear that the risks involved often pushed them towards certain decisions and away from others. As Laura explained it when I spoke to her in the summer, having come out the other end of the process, “The hardest thing about the application process wasn’t the essays or the applications, but the motivation. It just seemed like I was going to fall short from what they were looking for.”¹³

“If I don’t go to college, I’ll end up working at McDonald’s”

Research on poor and working-class parents universally cites their desire for their children to go to college (Knight et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney, 2002, Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Weis, 1990). Unlike middle-class parents, however, these desires carry an extra weight for children: for they are tinged with parental hopes for children to achieve something that they could not, and freighted with their own tremendous, daily sacrifices on their children’s behalf (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Weis, 1990).

I heard these sentiments echoed in my conversations with parents. For many parents, they were reflecting on the things that had gotten in their own way of completing their education. Talking to Jasmine’s father earlier in the year, he explained:

“My sense is she’ll have the opportunity to do better away from home. I want her to experience campus life. Here it seems to be more of a grind—it’s easy to get distracted, you need money to live in New York. You sort of get sidetracked, things happen. That’s what happened to me—and then you find it’s too hard to go back.”

Carminé’s mother did finish college, and in fact ultimately went on for a master’s degree. She wants her daughter to be able to experience the campus life she only tasted. “I was away for a year, and then I stayed in the city and went to Fordham, because of Carminé. ‘How come you came back home?’ she asked me. ‘You,’ I told her (i.e., she got pregnant). I loved being away. That’s why I push for her to go away. I think it’s a life

she'll never have again."

In talking about their hopes for college, then, poor and working-class students expressed a sense of what was at stake very different from that of middle-class students. While one middle-class Tower student talked about the difference college would make in terms of "going to graduate school or what jobs you can get, depending on what school you go to," Connections High and Vista students, in particular, spoke of an escape from a depressingly familiar world of low-wage work, violence, and poverty on urban streets. For themselves and their families, these students carry an additional weight of hope and fear. "If I don't go to college, I'll end up working at McDonald's," Jasmine voiced in one conversation. Jason stated vehemently, "I'll kill myself if I don't get out of the city."

At the same time, many poor and working-class parents worry about sending their children off to a world that is alien to them. While middle-class professional parents, having gone to college campuses themselves, or working now in professional worlds where they encounter life on college campuses, have a rough picture of where their children are headed, this is often not the case for poor and working-class parents. They may have only actually set foot on a college campus once or twice—or their picture of college may come from television and movies rather than personal experience. How, then, can they anticipate the issues their children will face, and how will they be able to help them if they run into trouble? Will they be able to stay connected to their children as they head off to this new world? Thus, as Fine and Burns note, so-called opportunities for mobility are rarely clean. "More often they are fraught with ambivalence, loyalty oaths, and alienation . . . 'opportunities to succeed' may tear at the fabric of biography, identity, loyalty and belonging . . . poor and working-class students confront a loyalty oath far more often than middle-class and elite students do." (2003, p. 850)

Poor and working-class young people sense these worries, and it heightens their own anxieties about going away. While middle- and upper-class parents may resist having their children travel across the country for college, any place outside of New York City seemed too far away for many of the parents in my research. Ana explains, "I've been battling, because my mom doesn't want me to go away because she'll miss me, but sometimes I want to go away. So then I change my mind . . . I don't know, it's just confusing to me."

These fears and desires weigh heavily on a time already freighted with so much. As winter of their senior year turned into spring, the anxiety in the air at Connections and Vista was palpable.

“I just want to surprise her in the end”

Finally, as pioneers in this new world, poor and working-class students must face these risks alone in ways that most middle-class students do not need to. A great deal of research reports low-income students facing this difficulty (Knight, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney, 2002; Weis, 1990). Lacking the “social capital” (Coleman, 1988) or “cosmopolitan networks” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) of their middle-class peers, these students often do not have adults whom they can turn to for help with the many and often confusing elements of applying for college. While poor and working-class students at Vista, Tower, and Connections often compiled their college lists alone or with their college counselor, did much of the application themselves, and struggled alongside their parents to fill out financial aid forms—or completed them alone—middle-class students received a great deal of help with all of these tasks (McDonough, 1997).

At Tower, Aaron’s mother admitted that she had sent away for all of her son’s applications; her son confirmed this, adding, “I didn’t fill out any applications. My mom did. I mean, not like. . . like, when they asked me to answer something, I answered it. But she actually filled them out. And she was the one who printed out all the transcript request forms, got all the supplementary applications. . . .” Parents also used their connections to get interviews and letters of recommendation for their children, paid to mail applications express at the last minute, and assumed it was their responsibility, not their children’s, to fill out FAFSA applications.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Fernando, a student at Vista, lamented, “I don’t really talk a lot with my parents about college, because, I mean, it’s different because my parents, they didn’t go to college, you know. Like I can’t approach them with all kinds of stuff, like what’s this, what’s this . . . because they don’t really know. So, they could give me some advice, just like, ‘Don’t worry.’ That’s basically all. . . .”

The immense differences in help that students received—based on their class location—were most often invisible to them, however. While middle-class students appreciated their parents’ help, they also saw it as ordinary—simply what parents do—and they continued to see themselves as the main actors in their college search. Poor and working-class students, on the other hand, braved the process alone, believing that this was what it meant to become “grown-ups” and expecting little in the way of assistance. When I asked Saquina whether or not she had discussed college with her mother—and whether or not her mother would be able to help out with paying—she responded, “She’s got a lot of stuff to do—I want her to be informed, but I just want to surprise her in the end. So

if I have to take out loans, pressure's on me, if I have to do it, I will, just to get by."

It is this invisibility that allows an ideology of meritocracy to prevail in our national consciousness, as well as in the consciousness of young people, that "camouflages structural group-level barriers, and points a damning finger at individuals who seem to be personally responsible when they don't succeed" (Fine & Burns, 2003).

Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) note, "The most toxic effects of individualism are experienced by those with the least education and capital . . . rather than interpreting the premium placed on self-reliance as an ideological cover, it is taken as a prescription for actual behavior" (p. 240). Middle- and upper-class students comfortably take credit for their successes, while poor and working-class students and parents take responsibility for their failures—both too often unaware of the difference in resources that lie beneath the differing outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The last year of high school and the process of figuring out one's next life destination is a momentous, stressful time in the life of all young people, whatever their social class background. Students must reconcile their dreams and fantasies of the future with real places and options; they must face the potential pain of rejection, having put themselves and their pride on the line; whatever they do, they must face leaving the familiar routines of K-12 education and perhaps their homes and communities as well.

The challenges and risks that the transition to college entail, however, are profoundly different depending on students' social class location. The lived experience of social class—on financial, social, and psychological levels—shapes students' perceptions, experiences, and decision-making processes in ways both conscious and unconscious as they travel through their senior year of high school. For middle-class students, at this point in American history, this most often means struggling with *where* they will go to college—but not *if*. Poor and working-class students, however, face a different reality. Despite the clear financial benefits of a college education, these students read the world around them and correctly perceive the many *ifs*, the tremendous risks that they must take in order to reach for the social mobility that a college education promises. So much that middle-class students take for granted, they cannot assume.

The relative lack of attention to the role of social class in youth development—both within academic literature until recently, and in the world of education and educational policy—renders invisible the very different

ground upon which young people stand at this important crossroads. Aronowitz (2003) argues that “class denial is woven into the fabric of American life,” (p.150) and the consequences of this denial are, too often, to misread and misjudge the aspirations, motivations, and decision-making processes of poor and working-class youth and their families and communities. In order to even begin to understand the world through their eyes, we must do a better job of standing in their shoes.

Attempting—through my research—to stand in those shoes for just a moment, many of the prevailing notions about the “contradictory” attitudes that low-income students of color hold about education and higher education began to look quite like something else. In fundamental ways, poor and working-class young people are “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987): weighing the risks of taking an economic gamble on the social mobility that college promises but does not always deliver; deciphering messages about who does and does not belong on a college campus; and trying to maintain their own psychological dignity and self-esteem in the face of myriad challenges to it. They understand, better than any college administrator, academic researcher, or educational policy-maker, the leap they must take to place themselves in a new and unfamiliar world, and the chance for broken bones they risk in their landing. Rather than the contradictions that these students express, in their words and actions, existing inside the bodies and minds of young people, these contradictions are *external*, a part of the world in which they must negotiate their development/identity, and make their way.

That world—an America in which opportunity is theoretically available to all, and yet systematically denied on the basis of class, in intricate and often hidden ways—too often constrains young people’s development, and then blames them (and makes them blame themselves) for the outcomes. If we are to truly understand the lived realities of these students—and find ways to help them in their journey to college—we need to recognize the role of social class in the America that we all inhabit.

Notes

1 Support for the specific research reported on in this article came from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Spencer Foundation Social Justice and Social Development in Education Studies Training Grant. The data was collected under the umbrella of a larger research project, the Opportunity Gap Project (Michelle Fine, principal investigator). With support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Opportunity Gap Project worked with a multigenerational, multi-site team of researchers in New York and New Jersey to study how urban and suburban teens perceive the processes and consequences of the racial “achievement gap”. See Fine, et al (2004).

2 At each school, approximately half of the senior class took the surveys. Overall, a total of 253 surveys were collected at the three schools.

3 All names of both schools and students are pseudonyms.

4 Many of the students at these schools, therefore, sit at the intersection of race and class, a not-unusual situation in this country, where race too often over-predicts class. In this article, I focus on the particular social class effects of sitting at this juncture.

5 Carnevale and Rose (2003) found an inverse relationship between the percentage of students receiving free lunch at a school, and the percentage who take college-entrance exams; similarly, a study conducted by MPR Associates for the Education Department in 1997 (using data from the NELS-88) suggests that across the country, many needy students who are qualified for college do not bother to take college-entrance exams or fill out applications (Burd, 2002).

6 Literature on small schools shows a consistent and often strong relationship between school size and higher graduation and college-going rates for low-income students of color (Gladden, 1998). Lindsay (1984) and Sares (1992) both found that, even when controlling for factors such as ability and high-school achievement, smaller high-school size is related to completing more years of college and graduate education for these students.

7 Most public school systems have no mechanism for collecting this data.

8 A quote I heard repeatedly at all three high schools.

9 As part of the larger Opportunity Gap Survey, Fine et al. (2004).

10 Again, the majority of middle-class students at Tower are white, while the majority of students of color come from lower-income backgrounds.

11 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey.

12 Which is not to say that this is not a difficult process for middle-class students, and one that puts their self-esteem on the line as well, but to argue that is a different—and ultimately less threatening—kind of risk.

13 Laura was accepted into a post-graduate program at Northfield Mount-Hermon after graduating from Vista Academy, and is currently attending Wesleyan University.

14 The resources invested in middle-class students in fact often begins before their senior year, in the form of SAT prep classes, tutors, and experiences at summer camps and on trips which they can write about in their college essays, etc.

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